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ABSTRACT

The Program for Research and Evaluation of Public Schools (PREPS) is the service center component of the Center for Educational Partnerships at Mississippi State University. PREPS considers as its mission promoting growth of the whole educator and whole student through educational partnerships across Mississippi. School districts can join PREPS to receive such services as professional development sessions on instructional issues, crisis management, and program and faculty evaluation. PREPS' member districts joined forces with other Mississippi school districts to improve performance on state subject area tests, forming Teachers and Interns: Partners for Success. This paper discusses how the program was developed and describes program components, which include several professional development sessions at which teachers receive curriculum materials. Sessions are designed so teachers experience the teaching strategies as students in a simulated classroom. Sessions emphasize the need to develop reading, writing, and higher order thinking skills. One session concentrates on assessment. Between July 1998 and April 1999, 10 subject area sessions were presented to 474 teachers from 70 PREPS member districts. Evaluation of the project by participating teachers indicated that teachers considered the sessions extremely effective. (SM)

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A Partnership to Create Successful Subject Area Curriculum and Build Effective Professional Development

A Report of the Effectiveness of the Professional Development Series as perceived by the Teacher Participants

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In the mid 1990's Mississippi initiated Subject Area testing. End of course tests are given to students in Algebra I, Biology I, and United States History courses. All students enrolled in the courses are required to take the end of course tests. Student performance on these tests are a part of the accreditation model for Mississippi, helping to determine a school district's rating on a scale of Level 1 (the lowest rating) through Level 5 (the highest rating). The tests consist of enhanced multiple choice items and constructed response questions, which are graded by a holistic rubric. Content of the tests is derived from the State Curriculum Frameworks for each subject.

The Program for Research and Evaluation of Public Schools (PREPS) is the service center component of the Center for Educational Partnerships at Mississippi State University. PREPS considers as its mission promoting growth of the whole educator and whole student through educational partnerships across Mississippi. School districts join PREPS for a nominal enrollment fee and are entitled to the services of the organization which include (in part) professional development sessions on instructional issues, crisis management, and program and facility evaluation.

In late 1997 PREPS member districts indicated a need for assistance with improving performance on the state subject area tests. PREPS joined forces with other Mississippi school districts which also recognized the need for professional development for practicing and pre-service teachers centering on this issue. Thus Teachers and Interns: Partners for Success was formed with the following Mississippi school districts agreeing to act as partners in securing a Goals 2000 grant to fund the project: Choctaw County School District (which acted as fiscal agent), Alcorn County School District, New Albany School District, Petal School District, Philadelphia School District, and Mississippi School for Math and Science.

Development of the Program

After notification that the grant had been awarded, PREPS contracted for development and implementation of the project with another member of the Center for

Educational Partnerships at Mississippi State University, the Mississippi Writing\ Thinking Institute (MWTI), which is a National Writing Project site. The proposed Subject Area project was to be modeled in part on the successful Integrated Assessment project which teacher consultants of MWTI had developed for PREPS in 1996-97.

The project coordinator, a former classroom teacher who is serving as Assessment Coordinator for MWTI, assembled a development team for each subject area, consisting of Writing Project teacher consultants in each of the subject areas as well as other master teachers for each subject. There were five members of the Algebra I development team, two members of the Biology team, and four members of the United States History team. The teams studied National Standards for each of the three subjects as well as state test objectives for each subject, and drew on their expertise as master teachers. With the support of the test publisher, the teams developed curriculum model units that directly address the content objectives for each test. A second component of the project was to design professional development for practicing and pre-service teachers which address teaching strategies and assessment techniques for successful process teaching of each subject. Eleven additional classroom teachers were trained to become a part of the presentation team for the professional development.

Description of the Components

The curriculum units which teachers receive at the professional development sessions serve as models for them to develop other units to use in their classrooms. Teachers receive the following units and resource units: four units in Algebra I; two units, one resource unit, and one review unit in Biology I; and three units, three resource units, and one review unit in United States History.

A second integral part of the project is the five day professional development sessions when teachers receive the curriculum materials. (Teachers must attend the professional development series to receive the curriculum units.) The series of sessions is presented in an initial two day session, a two-day follow up session approximately one

month later, and a final follow up session approximately six weeks later. During the sessions, teacher- presenters model effective teaching strategies to use in each subject area. The sessions are designed so that teachers "experience" the teaching strategies as students in a simulated classroom setting. Presenters lead debriefing discussions with participants so that they understand the theory and reasoning underlying each strategy. Each subject area session is designed so that participants can recognize that the three state tests are not tests of recall but of thinking and application. Each presentation includes emphasis on the part that reading, writing, and developing higher order thinking skills play in each subject and on each subject area test. Between sessions teachers implement strategies and the teaching units and return to share their experiences. One two-day session concentrates on assessment. Teachers study rubrics used to assess the tests and score student anchor papers. Teacher leaders assist participating teachers in development of teaching units which incorporate process teaching and alternative assessments for use in their classrooms. Participants were awarded 3.75 CEU credits for attendance. (Receiving CEU credits for participating in continuing education is one method of recertification for Mississippi teachers.)

Scope of Work for year one

Ten Subject Area sessions were presented from July, 1998 through April 1999. Four hundred seventy-four teachers from seventy PREPS member districts attended the sessions: 176 in Algebra I, 158 in Biology I, and 140 in United States history. In addition, thirty pre-service teachers from the Methods classes in teaching biology, mathematics, and history at Mississippi State University received instruction and information about the content of the workshops. Students had guest presentations in their biology and history methods classes by two of the presenters. Approximately twenty of the pre-service teachers attended days three and four of one of the sessions.

Evaluation of the Project by teacher participants

Description of the Post Training Questionnaire

The post training questionnaire is a combination of numerical ratings and completing open- ended responses about the series of sessions. Participants do not give their names but do indicate their years of teaching experience and their years of teaching experience in the subject area. They also identify the location of the series of workshops they attended and the name of the presenter. Six items on the questionnaire are a 1 through 5 Likert scale with five being outstanding and/ or very valuable and 1 being poor and / or irrelevant. Participants are asked to rate the series of sessions according to quality of content of the presentations, delivery of the presentations, discussion and interaction with the presenter, small group work, units and other handouts, and overall effectiveness of the series. They also rank the logistics of the series (facilities and scheduling) on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Participants are then asked to provide comments related to the Likert scale. The next three items on the questionnaire ask participants to describe the most effective part of the series, make suggestions in the event that the sessions are presented again, and indicate if they are interested in a follow- up session and what they would like included in such a session. Participants are then given a list of strategies presented during the sessions and are asked to indicate what strategies they implemented in their classrooms, then choose one of the strategies they marked and describe how they implemented in and how it impacted their classroom.

Summary of Evaluations for Algebra I

Participants ranked the Algebra I sessions for overall effectiveness 4.8 on a scale of 5.0. The most common strategies which teachers implemented were changing their classroom tests to reflect the state assessment by using selected response and constructed response items. One teacher wrote, "I give constructed response about every two weeks now. Student participation and scores improve everytime."

Summary of Evaluations for Biology I

Participants ranked the Biology I sessions for overall effectiveness 4.8 on a scale of 5.0. The most common strategies which teachers implemented were changing their classroom tests to reflect the state assessment by using selected response and constructed response items. A representative teacher comment reads, " I took the ideas I learned about making constructed response questions and grading them to improve my tests. At first my students were failing that part on most of my tests. Soon they started doing better. I feel confident they will be ready for THE TEST in April."

Summary of Evaluations for United States History

Participants ranked the United States History sessions for overall effectiveness 4.8 on a scale of 5.0. The most common strategies which teachers implemented were two reading strategies: note-taking/ note-making and skimming and highlighting. One teacher commented, "The reading strategies and other suggested activities were very helpful. I need help in this area."

Future of the Project

The project received funding for the 1999- 2000 school year through another GOALS 2000 grant. Subject Area testing is undergoing changes in Mississippi and the units and professional development series is being revised to reflect those changes. Beginning in the spring of 2000, an additional test for English II will be administered. Curriculum units and a professional development series are in the developing stages now.

PREPS plans further study of the program though an analysis of student performance using scores of subject area assessments compared before and after this instructional treatment.